

Inspector General at Risk in Montgomery

by Phil Andrews

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“Who will guard the guardians?” is a question as timely today in Montgomery County as when posed by the philosopher Cicero in ancient Rome.

The Montgomery County Council’s answer in 1998 was to establish an independent Inspector General (IG). Championed by then-Councilmember Isiah Leggett, the Council unanimously overrode a veto by County Executive Douglas M. Duncan. After a national search, the Council selected Norman Butts, a lawyer and experienced certified internal auditor, to be the IG. In 2001, the Council reappointed him to a four-year term.

The IG sets his own work plan, independent of both the Council and Executive, and has diligently and effectively done his job -- to ferret out “fraud, waste, and abuse” in County government.

The IG’s work on abuse of County credit cards led to much-needed reform, and was an important factor in the subsequent departure of three top Executive Branch officials – the directors of fleet management, liquor control, and pension investments.

The IG’s report on the Department of Liquor Control showed that the process of conducting background checks for sensitive positions was wholly inadequate. As a result a department director was conducting business in the tens of millions of dollars while owing thousands of dollars in back taxes to the federal and state governments.

The IG will soon complete an audit of the County’s retirement plans. This is the first independent review of all aspects of these plans, which have \$2 billion in assets and are of vital importance to County employees and retirees. Recent pension scandals involving the state of Maryland and Fairfax County, Virginia show the downside of inadequate oversight.

The IG also has found uncollected County revenue in solid waste services, inadequate reimbursements from employees who have take-home car privileges, and large potential savings in school transportation. He blew the whistle on County tuition assistance abuses – again, resulting in needed reforms.

At a time when local governments are put upon financially and ought to be watching every penny, Montgomery County’s Inspector General is needed more now than ever before.

Yet the County's Chief Administrative Officer, Bruce Romer, proposes abolishing the Inspector General position and establishing an "Accountability Office" under his control.

The Inspector General should be accountable to the taxpaying public. That's why numerous organizations -- including the NAACP, Common Cause, the Montgomery County Civic Federation, and the Montgomery County Taxpayers League -- support keeping an independent Inspector General. Letters from the public to the Council are running almost unanimously in favor of retaining an independent inspector general.

Still, the Office of the Inspector General is at risk. Romer touts the budget savings of his proposal as a reason to adopt it, even though the Inspector General heads a four-person office with a modest budget of \$524,000. In a \$3 billion County budget with 32,000 employees, isn't it strange that the only agency being considered for elimination is our County watchdog against waste, fraud and abuse in County government?

Saving a few dollars in the short run by abolishing this independent office is the worst sort of "penny-wise and pound-foolish."

At a time when government budgets are stretched thin, we all have to do *more* with *less*. The Inspector General is a critical part of that equation. He's independent. He's a place where citizens and County employees alike can call in confidence. His work is a constant reminder to County government that shenanigans such as those he's uncovered are unacceptable.

Any Inspector General investigating potential wrongdoing is going to make enemies. That's why an Inspector General or any other credible fiscal watchdog must not be on a short leash that powerful officials can yank.

Montgomery County has an admirable history of good government. However, any \$3 billion enterprise is going to have some bad apples, as the Inspector General has demonstrated. It would be a travesty if the County Council gutted its own far-sighted and hard-fought work by abolishing the County's only independent fiscal watchdog.

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Phil Andrews, a Democrat representing Rockville and Gaithersburg on the County Council, chairs the Council's Public Safety Committee.